

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

March 13, 2020

The Honorable Nita Lowey
Chairwoman
House Committee on Appropriations
H-307 The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kay Granger
Ranking Member
House Committee on Appropriations
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Chairman
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services, Education, and
Related Agencies
2358-B Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Tom Cole
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor,
Health and Human Services, Education, and
Related Agencies
2467 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairwoman Lowey, Chairwoman DeLauro, Ranking Member Granger, and Ranking Member Cole:

As you consider Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 appropriations, we respectfully request you include report language that would help schools better prepare for impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19), as well as any future public health crisis, as it relates to the use of e-learning programs for those schools forced to close.

Across the United States, lack of access to broadband connectivity continues to impact large numbers of families and students. As of 2019, 27% of rural residents do not have access to broadband. According to the 2016 FCC Broadband Progress Report, nearly 12 million children live in homes without a broadband connection. This limits K-12 students' ability to complete assignments after school and creates the "homework divide." As schools adjust their operations to best protect students from public health threats, they must consider this homework divide to ensure all students, regardless of broadband access, are able to equitably continue their education.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended that if schools are dismissed, schools should consider implementing e-learning programs, including digital and distance learning options like online lessons – options that often require reliable access to broadband connectivity. The CDC also urges schools to determine how to deal with students who potentially lack Internet connectivity at home. Currently, many students who lack access to broadband at home complete their out of school assignments at public places with connectivity, such as restaurants or local businesses. However, CDC guidance also directs schools to discourage students from gathering in restaurants or shopping malls – presenting a further challenge to students who do not have broadband access in the home. For these reasons, we respectfully request the Committee include the following language in the report accompanying the FY21 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Appropriation Bill:

Public Health Crisis Response & Rural E-Connectivity -- While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides guidance to schools on continuing operations during a public health crisis, the equity concerns for students who live in households without access to broadband connectivity are unknown and may not be incorporated to schools' continuity of operations plans. As such, the Office of the Secretary of Education, in coordination with the Department of Agriculture and Federal Communications Commission, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, is directed to produce a study to be released to the public and delivered to Congress within 90 days of enactment detailing the impacts of broadband connectivity gaps on the abilities of schools to implement alternative education plans for students completing e-learning assignments during extended closings due to public health crises. The Secretary of Education is directed to include a plan of action for addressing broadband connectivity inequities in the short term for the current public health crisis caused by Covid-19 as well as a plan for long-term strategies to lessen the impacts of these inequities for public health crises that may prompt school closures in the future.

Student success should not be determined by zip code, and at a time when schools need to be focusing on keeping their children safe, families shouldn't be forced to worry about how their children will be able to keep up with their peers because of a lack of access to broadband. The language we request here will help put parents, students, and their schools at ease by ensuring that the Department of Education has a plan to help impacted schools better mitigate the effects of broadband connectivity issues as they pursue courses of action to keep their students safe.

We look forward to working with you on these important issues and thank you for your consideration of this important request.

Sincerely,



Abigail D. Spanberger

Member of Congress



Stacey E. Plaskett

Member of Congress

Member of Congress

**Support Students from Schools Closed for Coronavirus and Other Public Health Crisis
Request Letter to the House Committee on Appropriations and House Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies**

List of Signatories

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